

RESEARCH OUTPUTS / RÉSULTATS DE RECHERCHE

Introduction

Lobet-Maris, Claire

Published in:

Cultures of participation : media practices and literacy

Publication date:

2011

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (HARVARD):

Lobet-Maris, C 2011, Introduction. in *Cultures of participation : media practices and literacy*. Peter lang, Berlin, pp. 9-16.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Introduction

About this Book

Contemporary societies are marked by the presence and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) – exemplified by the burgeoning of social network sites (SNS) and mobile media. ICTs have become a central medium in the multiplicity of everyday social interactions, so much so that being able to access and use them has become a necessary precondition of participation today. Concurrently, media practice and consumption – epitomised by user created content (UCC) – has shifted from the twentieth century paradigm of ‘packaged media’ to the twenty-first century dynamism of ‘conversational media’. This shift has created new forums for engagement, agency and interaction. Given these conditions, what does it mean to participate?

This is the question that underscores this collection. From a variety of theoretical, empirical and methodological perspectives, each contribution explores participation in different social realms – from everyday life, interpersonal relationships, work and leisure activities to collective and political action. This collection demonstrates that participation is a localised notion, subject to technological, political, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural nuances. By focusing upon shifts in modes of social participation in different countries and cultural contexts, the chapters tackle how localities affect, among other things, the temporal, spatial and organisational factors framing participation; the engagement, trust, norms and affects involved; and the personal and collective skills required.

Through the lens of participation we can begin to understand some of the cultures, practices and politics emerging within the contemporary. To speak of participation today raises a series of questions on how the presence and use of new media affect modes of participation, and to which extent they may have become a prerequisite thereof: Do the presence and use of ICTs serve to empower actors on the individual and collective level? Is the use of these technologies already sufficient for participation? Can participation be measured by, or even be equated with, increased connectivity, or with the possibility of providing content and information? If it is not, what would be the conditions that allow us to talk of participation?

The collection is divided in four parts. In Part I we critically explore different ways of conceptualising participation, from theoretical approaches to social

representations. The study of new media helps us to reconsider the traditional ways in thinking of, and empirically enquiring into, participation. Here, notions of both media literacy and mediated activity are subject to reconceptualisation.

In Part II, the affective implications of participation are addressed through empirical case studies of mobile media and online gaming. These contributors contemplate the role of emotion – an area often overlooked when analysing participation. Here we are reminded that the rise of ICTs has also, not by accident, witnessed the rise of ‘personal’ technologies – a phenomenon that is shaped by, and shapes, affective performativity. Moreover, the significant role of play – central in the invention, adaptation and adoption of numerous social media practices (from Short Messaging Systems [SMS] to gaming) – is unpacked for its cultural relativity. Indeed, what determines play, just as what informs affect, is massaged by a series of factors from micro to macro, individual and collection across a cross-section of factors – age, gender, class, ethnicity, cultural context etc.

New media also contribute to a need for further conceptualising the affective implications in a redefinition of political participation. Drawing on cases of collective actions, social mobilisation and political debates, the two chapters of Part III question the divide between communication and political participation and explore the roles being played by new media in the making of a public and in empowering its voice. In both Part II and III, we can see how new media practices are creating opportunities for alterations in the affective culture of various social groups – particularly through examining the political implications of such transformations.

Finally, in Part IV we explore the complex dynamics of interactions and the multiplicity of actors involved. Empirical cases related to different media are presented: social networks sites, sharing sites and digital television. The contributions remind us that participation is framed by social norms and institutional regulations. These practices question whether new regulations are required, both to shape a new media landscape and to address ethical concerns.

The contributions in this book question two dominant perspectives on participation. Firstly, they interrogate some of the assumptions around technological centred perspectives, which equate participation with connectivity and accessibility, to show that those technological conditions do not guarantee the emergence of modes of participation. Technology is only one factor in what determines participation. Secondly, this collection exposes the limitations of dominant models of participation in the social sciences tradition whereby it is viewed as goal-oriented action that is measured through public visibility – often conflated with public sphere debates. In this model, significant factors such as receptivity, emotions and sociability are excluded. Drawing on a variety of media practices and forms of digital literacy this collection provides a richer landscape for understanding the complexities of participation today.

Overview of the Chapters

The first part of this volume, 'Paradigms of Participation', provides readers with some of the theories and models for understanding participation both within and beyond the online. In Leopoldina Fortunati's 'Online Participation and the New Media' we are presented with a case study of how so-called 'digital natives' in Italy are defining and conceptualising online participation. As Fortunati identifies, there are various forms of active and passive modes of offline participation that highlight the highly ambivalent nature of participation and agency historically. This phenomenon is, as Fortunati finds, replicated within the online. Drawing from a study involving 150 students, Fortunati uncovers the way in which the Internet is less of a political – and more of a social – tool for participation.

The interrogation of the changing and often ambivalent definition of participation is furthered in Hajo Greif and Matthias Werner's 'From Information to Broadband Society, Whence and Whither?' For Greif and Werner, if earlier periods have been characterised as the 'industrial society' or 'mercantile society', could contemporary culture be defined as a 'broadband society'? Taking the COST 298 rubric of 'living in a broadband society', they question just how productive and valid it is to argue such a position. By taking to task the very concept of information, they consider the basics of ICTs constituting social participation.

This problematising of the relation between agency and technology (in society) is continued in Giuseppina Pellegrino's 'Participatory Frameworks'. Pellegrino's chapter takes us through a guided tour of some of the important methods of conceptualising and investigation that relation. Starting from a critique of technological determinism, this paper explores and probes the various traditions from the domestication and Participatory Design approaches to Science and Technology Studies and Social Informatics.

Part I concludes with Kate Crawford's 'Listening, not Lurking', in which Crawford challenges the assumptions around voice (and specifically speaking) being determinates of agency and participation. As Crawford suggests, many models of online participation have assumed analogies of the voice. But if everyone is talking, who is listening? Indeed, whilst modes of listening have been given pejorative terms such as 'lurking' within western discourse, we must unpack such a myth. For example, let us consider one of the biggest blogosphere, China. The Internet in China – whilst being a highly regulated and tightly governed medium – is also a space for public opinion in which the practice of 'lurking' is seen as an important form of participation. Can we move beyond didactic and binary models of participation in which practices such as lurking are seen like an Internet version of TV's couch potatoes? Crawford provides much insight into rethinking some of the assumptions around agency and participation.

In Part II, practices of participation are read in light of interpersonal relationships. Through a variety of empirical case studies, all of these contributors contemplate the role of emotion – an area all too easily overlooked in analyses of

participation. Here we are reminded that the rise of ICTs has also witnessed the rise of genuine *personal* technologies. Moreover, the role of play – central in the invention, adaptation and adoption of numerous social media practices (such as gaming) – is unpacked.

The section opens with Naomi S. Baron's 'Attitudes towards Mobile Phones', which presents the reader with a rich sample of culturally variant ways for viewing one's mobile phone and its uses. Rather than simply taking note of functions that are available, the volume of calls and texting – along with the venues in which mobiles are employed – is provided in order to paint a picture of the user's internal perspectives on what she or he associates with using mobile phones. Although a growing variety of country-specific studies on such perceptions have emerged over the past decade, the number of cross-cultural studies has been smaller, especially with respect to identical survey instruments being applied in multiple contexts. To help fill this lacuna, this study presents a quantitative inquiry into mobile phone use by university students in five countries: Sweden, the US, Italy, Japan, and Korea. Using word association tasks, interesting patterns of cultural similarities and differences in attitudes towards mobile phone use – one's own and those of others – are carved out in this study.

Very much complementary to Baron's study, Jane Vincent's contribution showcases a set of findings from a series of qualitative studies conducted by the Digital World Research Centre (DWRC) during the last few years. Evoked by the paper's title 'Emotions and the Mobile Phone', Vincent identifies the ways in which emotions have come to be increasingly mediated via mobile phones. Drawing from interactionist theories in media sociology, Vincent inquires into the roles of the mobile phone as an intermediary for relationships and as a repository of emotions that range from love to hate, from sadness to joy. In these roles, the mobile phone is far from a mere interface through which emotions are mediated – rather, they are two folded. Firstly, the very ways in which emotional relationships are conducted have changed, especially in terms of the modes in which users manage spatial vs. emotional closeness and distance. Secondly, in adopting these very roles, the mobile phone itself has become an ambivalent object of both positive and negative affection – and often of both at once.

In 'Playing the Waiting Game', Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson utilise a case study to discuss notions of 'presence' and 'place'. The authors present an inquiry into practices of mobile gaming, with particular attention to the gendered stereotypes attached to this practice. This qualitative study probes the activities and attitudes of young female students in game design – who comprise an interesting sample for running counter to the common stereotype that girls play casual mobile games, whereas boys profess in playing 'serious' online games. Hjorth and Richardson explore the different spaces in which mobile games are played by their respondents – public transport, at home alone, waiting in queues – and the attitudes and self-perceptions concomitant with engaging

in such play. Most significantly, the ways of ‘in-between-ness’ is enacted in mobile gaming suggest a more subtle notion of presence than one might expect from mobile games; that is, mobile games are more complex than a mere idling away otherwise unproductive time.

Managing presence and social relations takes a different route in Chung Tai Cheng’s ‘Imagined Performativity’. Building upon this theoretical concept of Judith Butler, Cheng explores the ways in which young Chinese migrant workers, having moved from their closely-knit rural environment to the cities in search of employment, establish and maintain new social relationships. These relationships are developed in the context of a culture that, traditionally, measures the proximity of social relationships by the degree of proximity of kinship ties, thereby discouraging genuine friendships and emotional ties between non-kinsmen. Encountering themselves within an environment of strangers, those young workers are found to use their mobile phones and a variety of its functions not only to remain in touch with their home community, but also to seek and make new friends in a space that serves to protect them from prejudice. It is in cyberspace where they can enact clearly distinct modes of social relationship, constructing new roles for themselves and their relations.

Moving from interpersonal to political relationships and activities, the two chapters of Part III, ‘Redefining Political Participation’, invite the readers to reconsider established views of what constitutes the ‘public’ on the political scene. The papers address this issue on the background of two strongly contrasted political cultures, namely that of Spain and China. They also contrast two concepts of participation, with public mobilisation on the one hand, and deliberative disposals on the other. Yet to both chapters, the issue raised by John Dewey about the public and its power is central.

In their chapter, ‘An Original Protest, at Least’, Amparo Lasén and Iñaki Martínez de Albeniz introduce us to new and original patterns of mediated mobilisation: the smart mob and the flash mob. These two fascinating types of mobs can be seen as indicative of new public practices this century. While exhibiting commonality such as a similar aesthetic sensibility, the two types of mobs also differ greatly on one central issue concerning their means-ends rapport. If the first mobilises people sharing a same political protest or a ‘smart’ concern, the second one is free of any purpose beyond the crowd’s mobilisation in itself. Shall we see in the flash-mob a post-modern expression of crowd narcissism or a formal rituality without content? For the authors, the flash-mob rather invites us to re-think the traditional paradigm of public mobilisation where *hybrid masses are politics in process*.

In the second chapter, ‘The Less Expected’, we move from public manifestation to more or less shadowed stages of democratic learning. For Boxu Yang, Yuan Le and Shanshan An, most research into the Internet in China has focused upon the ‘Great Fire Wall’, to the detriment of other issues related to

Internet use and censorship in China. Their chapter is an intellectual and fascinating invitation to look behind that wall. Through several cases figuring various actors and media, the authors deploy different politically mediated scenes, ranging from pure information to spaces of deliberation. One central feature in all these scenarios is the tension between freedom and control – presenting us with a sort of experimental ‘tango’ between people and political authorities. All those cases bring some empirical testimonies to John Dewey’s approach of the experimental democracy and its public. Although censorship is still well alive in China, these cases should be considered as scenes of democratic learning where the public and the authorities experiment new ways to govern the polity.

The fourth and last part of the present volume, ‘Social Media and Media Practices’, provides readers with valuable insights about social and policy implications of media practices such as SNS, digital photography and digital television. In ‘The Facebook Family’, Brian Simpson discusses how ICTs are constructing new forms of regulation of family life. He focuses on how perceived risks about SNS are generating new forms of regulation for families. For example, *Facebook* pages of young people are used by parents to discover why a child has taken their life or gone missing. Spouses or parents may use mobile phone records or tracking software for online activity to check the behaviour of their partner or child. While this may simply be viewed as increased surveillance within the family, it also raises questions about how this changes the nature of participation in family life, whether as partner or parent. Digital technologies generate public or traceable records in traditionally private realms of existence. The author analyses the implications of new media practices and public guidance and corporate safety tips regarding parenting and the notion of parent responsibility nowadays. The potential for surveillance and discipline of social media goes beyond family and the domestic realm.

Lieve Gies’ ‘The Frenzy of Digital Photography’ illustrates the dynamics of power and resistance in relation to everyday uses of digital photography. Body and bodily functions are often at the centre of digital content and this invites a broader reflection on the privileged position of the corporeal in the formation of social identities in digital culture. The reality of Web 2.0, with its enhanced capacity to carry visual content, is that the corporeal is being reaffirmed as the ultimate marker of identity and has become the focus of intense surveillance, a phenomenon that, as Gies argues, has a strong biopolitical undercurrent. Giorgio Agamben’s concept of ‘bare life’ and Jean Baudrillard’s ‘war porn’ are discussed with reference to images of torture from the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, revealing that these extreme cases of shocking and disturbing user-generated content (UGC) share biopolitical elements with digital practices of ordinary users, when truthfulness becomes tantamount to visual, personal and biometric self-revelation.

Privacy, identities and young users practices regarding SNS are discussed as well in Romina Cachia and Alexandra Haché's 'Hyperlinked Avatars'. This chapter explores some of the social externalities arising from young people's increasing interaction through SNS. The aim is to shed light on key emerging areas about how young people interact through SNS and how they appropriate these online spaces, in particular, for identity negotiation and the management of personal networks. People's profiles in SNS are considered as a sort of hyperlinked avatars playing a crucial role in the way young people manage and perform their identities and build their relations. Network capital becomes a growing part of young people social capital, but the authors remind us that significant numbers of young people still remain at the margins of the knowledge society and social networks.

In the last contribution to this section we move from the social implications of people's practices regarding new social media, to the policy implementations of changes regarding old media, such as television, in order to reinforce its participatory character, as television becomes digital. In 'Tracing the Policy Challenges of the Digital Dividend', Lilia Raycheva traces out the major European policy measures, related to the priorities of the transition period from digital terrestrial television switchover to analogue switch-off. Her analysis focuses on the basic European policies for best use of the spectrum dividend during the last decade from the viewpoint of the current digital terrestrial television developments. Pan-European moves for further promotion of the efficient usage of the released frequencies in the audiovisual sector are of major economic, social and cultural importance. One of the key questions in the context of digital switchover refers to the task of best use of the spectrum dividend not only in terms of improvement of the terrestrial broadcasting services, but also in the development of the 'converged' broadcasting services, as well as of the new 'uses' which do not belong to the broadcasting family.

Background

This volume collects a refereed selection of contributions to the international conference 'The Good, the Bad and the Challenging', organised by COST Action 298, 'Participation in the Broadband Society', in Copenhagen, 13-15 May 2009. One strand of this conference was titled 'Humans as e-Actors', from which all papers included here were selected. The international character of the conference ensured the international scope of this book, concerning both the authors and the empirical studies presented here. Contributions are coming from Europe, the United States, China and Australia. A similar diversity is to be found on the level of content, as empirical research on the topic is complemented with novel theoretical insights, and as a variety of forms of participation are systematically addressed: politics, everyday life, family, and leisure. Up until recently, few academic books addressed the issue of participation in conjunction

with media practices. In an attempt to fill this gap in interdisciplinary scholarship, this collection presents new modes of participation that, in turn, serve to revise and redefine the concept of participation itself.

Given this background, the present volume is intended for a readership of scholars and students in Media and Communication Studies, Science and Technology Studies, Sociology, Political Science, but, for its mostly non-technical style, also for technology designers and developers, technology and media consultants, policymakers and public authorities, and for journalists inquiring into the role of new media in forms of social, cultural and political participation.